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STATE FACES DECISIONS

Prison numbers keep going up

Donal Campbell must feel as if his middle name is Sisyphus. Alabama's prison commissioner surely can empathize with that poor soul, whom legend has it was punished by being forced to forever push uphill a stone that kept rolling back down the hill.

In Campbell's case, the stone is an ever rising prison population that keeps growing and adding fur-

ther strain to an already seriously overburdened system. In May of last year, there were 26,465 inmates in Alabama's prisons. In May of this year, there were 27,732. There's no reason to expect that trend to change.

Reform

Without major reforms, there is no prospect of ending overcrowding in Alabama's prisons.

"I don't know what would trigger that to

happen," Campbell told the *Advertiser* this week.

Nothing would — as long as Alabama operates under its current system of incarcerating large numbers of people and pushing them into prison facilities that are now at about 200 percent of their designed capacity. Significant change has to take place, much of it outside the prison system.

Gov. Bob Riley appointed a task force in April that is beginning work on possible solutions to prison overcrowding. It is important for Alabamians to understand that prison overcrowding is far more than a matter of inmate comfort. Constitutional questions on the treatment of prisoners are at issue, but this is also a public safety issue and a judicial issue.

When the state deprives an individual of liberty, it also assumes a solemn responsibility for that individual. The state cannot keep shoehorning inmates into prisons indefinitely without facing legal action, which it will lose, as the record of the past several decades makes clear.

The safety of inmates is compromised, but that's only part of the problem. The safety of prison employees, in particular the corrections officers who have direct oversight responsibilities for inmates, is threatened. The safety of the law-abiding public, which is supposed to be protected by prisons, is threatened as well.

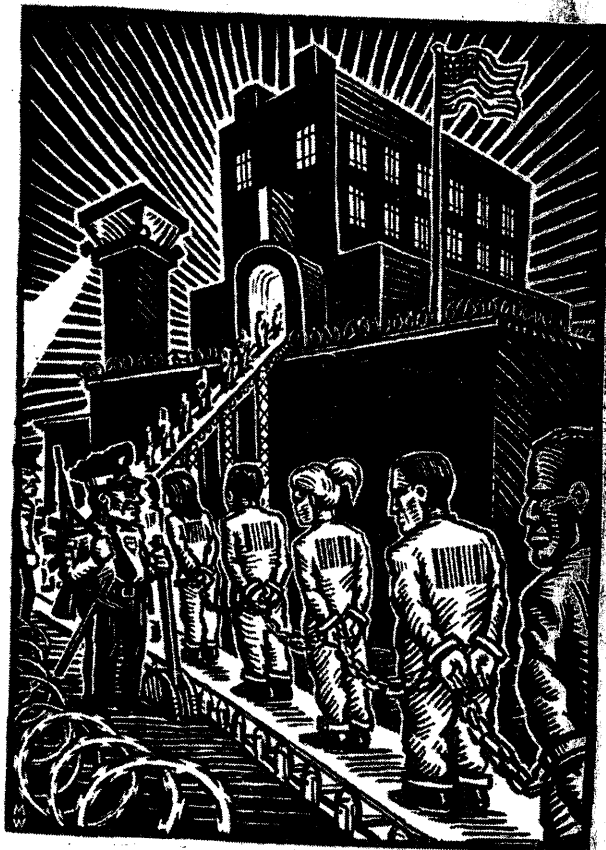
severely overcrowded prison facilities with potential for danger. Wardens have been saying for months that it is little short of miraculous that Alabama has not had a major outbreak of prison violence.

Some stopgap measures have been taken, but they are just that. They do not address the kind of systemic reforms Alabama needs. Housing inmates in a private prison in Louisiana, for example, has reduced the overcrowding at Tutwiler Prison for Women and kept the state in compliance with a court order in an overcrowding lawsuit. It has not, however, done anything about the causes of overcrowding.

An accelerated parole program for nonviolent offenders had the most impact on the problem, but only temporarily. Hundreds of such paroles eased overcrowding for a time, but as the numbers cited above show, the flow of inmates into the prisons soon had the population going even higher.

The harsh reality is that Alabama needs sentencing reform that will stop sending to prison nonviolent offenders who do not need to be there for the sake of preserving the safety of the public. Certainly violent criminals need to be behind bars, but many nonviolent property offenders do not.

Until Alabama can start routinely sentencing such offenders to alternatives such as community-based restitution programs instead of to prison, there is no chance of permanently reducing overcrowding unless the state embarks on a massive prison-building program. It can't afford that and even if it could, it would be an unwise use of resources.



GOOD MORNING, GOVERNOR

A van transportation service that helps compensate for reduced bus service in the Black Belt is an example of the kind of innovative thinking needed to help the region. The reduced bus service could have been a serious setback. You should encourage such smart responses to potential adversity.

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